

HONEST TO OUR CHILDREN

a pamphlet
for parents —
and others

A document prepared by the Education Committee of the
British Humanist Association for parents and others.

1. The Development of Understanding

The arrival of a new baby is an exciting event. The tiny boy or girl lying in the cot awakens a sense of wonder that a new human being has emerged. The physical marvel of the child's formation is great enough, but far more exciting is the thought that within the child lie the seeds of a new personality. That sleeping baby has a brain already pulsating with energy, and a marvellous network of cells and nerves ready to promote his development towards personal fulfilment.

A young child is a robust little creature, but he is also desperately vulnerable to what we, the adults, do to him in his early years. If we give him confidence in himself, and courage to face the world, and a wealth of formative experience, then his powers, whatever they may be, will have a maximum chance of growing to their full fruition. If, instead, we discourage him, and undermine his confidence, and limit his experience too much, he may hang back from bold contact with life, from which mind and personality grow.

This does not mean that every child who shrinks from life does so because of some failure of his parents, or other adults. He may be discouraged for some other reason. For example, he may feel unable to compete with a brother or sister. Nor does it mean that every discouraged child goes into retreat. He may fight back with furious aggression, like a person singing in the dark to keep his courage up. (All children are aggressive at times, but *constant* aggressivity is evidence of some kind of stress or insecurity.)

The point we need to watch is that we should do all we can to foster the child's confidence in his own powers. He can then, and *only* then, enter into a vigorous, formative relationship with the world of people and things around him. Personal confidence is the vitamin of personal development.

We cannot here go fully into the many aspects of development that lead towards a confident, competent, well-balanced personality. We are mainly considering, in this pamphlet, a *single* aspect only—the process by which a child builds up a valid picture of himself or herself and the world. But this alone is immensely important. To know where you are, to understand what is going on around you, to learn to trust your own knowledge and thought—these are tremendous assets for a child, or, indeed, for anyone. Feelings are, of course, involved too. The right sort of knowing helps to produce the right sort of feeling. Right knowing linked to right feeling builds up an assured competence for dealing with life. It is in the power of the adults surrounding the child to give, or to withhold, this competence.

The great Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget, has shown that the child's understanding of the reality around him follows a process of growth as the years pass. For the first two years the child is kept busy learning to move and to use his senses. He explores his tiny world with everything he has got. He sucks and bites things, handles them, pushes and pulls them, lifts and drops them, throws things about and knocks things over. And all the time he is looking, listening, feeling, smelling, tasting. It may seem random behaviour to the casual observer, but it all has to do with the child's absorbed interest in finding what is what.

The child is learning all the time. He learns that objects are separate from one another, that some things can move on their own account and that others can't. He gets ideas about colours, shape, weight and the feel of things. The child benefits greatly from having plenty to explore and from being given confidence to explore. These very early experiences lay the foundations for a mature understanding in later years.

The next big step on the road to understanding—about age two to about

seven—comes with the acquisition of language. The child now has two worlds to live in—the real world of things and people, and the symbolic world of language. By five years of age, the average child knows about 2,000 words. Two years later he will have 4,000 words at his disposal. A vast new world opens up. He can talk to people and be talked to. His powers of thought and imagination can now be fed by stories. By the end of this phase, a start in reading will have been made—yet another “window on the world”.

Right from the beginning of his adventure into the world of words the child is eager to know, *and needs to know*, what is “really true” and what is “just a story”. His future understanding may become confused if his needs in differentiating the “real” from the “pretend” are not honestly met. All parents are aware of the intensity with which a child asks “is it true?” In posing this question, the child is placing his trust in the honesty of adults. He is totally dependent upon them. If they help him, the experience with which he is striving to come to terms—just being alive and exploring—will add up and make sense; if they confuse him, he will become bewildered and lost.

During the period from about seven to about eleven—the third phase of understanding—the child continues to explore the world around him with great intensity and application. Boys and girls develop a wide range of interests through which they each clarify their own ideas of weight, size, shape and so forth. These ideas have been built up previously and can now be really used. If an adult goes into a strange room and notices a small table in the corner, he knows what shape it is even though he does not see the shape, i.e. from an angle, a round table *looks* oval, and a square table *looks* diamond-shaped. Past experience tells him that it is his position in relation to the table that creates the optical illusion. Similarly, if part of the table is obscured, say by a chair, the adult knows from previous experience that the

complete table *is* there although it cannot be seen. Likewise if an adult pours the water from a tumbler into a large glass jug, it looks rather a small amount, but he knows it is still the same quantity that it was before. Adults take such things for granted, but, at some stage, they have to be *learnt*. When the child has had a wide range of experiences previously, he is ready to enter the third phase in the growth of understanding, fully equipped to deal with it and to develop through the new experiences offered. Adults can help greatly to promote the child's growth of understanding by questioning him to provoke thought and by giving clear explanations when these are called for. Thus, phase by phase, the child's mind expands towards understanding the world he is living in.

Following the three preliminary stages, the mind really begins to come into its own, because now it has plenty of knowledge and experience stored away. Every boy and girl has learnt a lot about the people and objects that make up his or her world. It is on the basis of this knowledge that each will form ideas which merge into "concepts" to become the basis of individual thought. Thus, a child of twelve or older is equipped to think about the world in a realistic way.

But if the child is to think *well*, the ideas he has acquired must be *valid*. If they are not, experience and ideas will not square with one another. The child will then become confused, and may lose confidence in his own powers of thought.

All the above can be summed up as two fundamental facts of child development. One is that understanding comes to children from gradually learning about the nature of the world in which they are living. The other is that the children depend not only on experience *but also upon the adults around them*, if they are to acquire confidence and clear thinking.

2. Avoiding Confusion

The child is struggling to come to terms with all kinds of truth: the truth about the world, and universe, in which he is living; the truth about himself; the truth about other people and their relationships with him; the truth about how he ought to behave. As a result of his efforts, and what others tell him, he gradually puts together a map of reality as his guide to living. He will have to modify this map many times during the course of his lifetime but, at any stage, he needs *as good a map as he can get*.

We adults are, all the time, helping, or hindering, the children in making their maps, whether we realise it or not. To the extent that we give children clear, valid information we help them; to the extent that we give them confused, invalid information, we hinder them. To limit their field of exploration is to deny them the right to exercise their curiosity and discover reality for themselves. It follows, of course, that we should not claim to know anything unless we are certain. To impose false "certainties" on children is to spoil their maps of reality.

This responsibility of adults for the "reality maps" of children has only recently been appreciated. It used to be thought perfectly all right to tell children any old nonsense. The most notorious example is the misinformation that used to be given to children about where babies come from. Adults regarded their stories as harmless little fabrications to help them escape from embarrassing questions. But parents behaving like this often damaged their child's mental growth by deliberately sending him off along a false trail, and running the risk of losing his confidence in them as sources of information. Cases are on record of parents keeping up their pretences long after the children knew the truth—not a fruitful foundation for trusting parent-child relationships!

An example of how easy it is to set a child off on a wrong track comes from a father who unwittingly did so and lived to regret it profoundly. The father used to tell his little boy stories at bedtime, which they both greatly enjoyed, each fully aware that the stories were "made up". One day, this little boy asked his father: "What makes it rain?" At which point the father got his lines crossed and answered with a fantasy whereas the child was seeking for the truth.

"There's a man who lives in the clouds," the father said, "who has a big watering can. When he tipples it on us, down comes the rain."

The next day the little boy proudly announced at school that he knew what made rain, and told his friends about it. His friends told their parents, who promptly put them right in the matter. Whereupon the little boy had to face a barrage of ridicule from his friends, against whom he stoutly defended what his father had said. Then the teacher gently explained that the other boys *were* right. A very crestfallen and resentful little boy arrived back from school that day. The father was devastated by realising the damage he had done to his son's trust in him as a source of information.

No one wants to get stuffy about it but, in a scientific age, all the fantasy "How So" and "Why So" stories, so beloved of the Victorians and Edwardians, can lead to confusion unless it is made absolutely plain that the elephant did not *really* get a long trunk because it was pulled, etc.

"I do wish," a science teacher said recently, "people would stop telling children *nonsense* about *facts*. There's plenty of good *obvious* fantasy around." His point was that children enjoy the lively fantasy of animals that talk, people who change in size, and fairies who work their magic spells with the wave of a star-tipped wand. Such fantasy is obviously "made up" and is accepted by the children as such; it therefore cannot distort their

understanding of reality. But if adults mislead children regarding the distinction between fact and fantasy they are impeding their children's intellectual development by confusing them in an area which the children are eager to have clarified. If we give children a fantastic interpretation of a factual situation, or attempt a pseudo-factual interpretation of something that is, in essence, incredible, we shatter the integrity of their understanding.

It may well be true that feeling rather than intellect is at the heart of things ; but it is also true that a modern person needs a well-developed capacity for rational understanding. Otherwise the individual may fall between two stools and quite lose track of reality. This may be clearly observed to be happening in parts of Africa today. For example, the young women of the towns are no longer living within the system of ideas and practices that used to obtain in simple village life, which protected them from premarital pregnancies. But many of them have not yet accepted scientific birth control. Instead they rely—with disastrous results—on a belief that a leather thong tied around the waist will prevent pregnancy.

The survival of semi-magical old wives' tales into modern life is by no means to be found only in Africa. They survive as superstitious beliefs, and in other forms, in our own society. But wherever magic is brought in, rather than objective understanding, the development of reason is obstructed. To give children the minds they need for dealing confidently with the modern world, we have to tell them the truth about life as fully and honestly as we can.

This means that we should answer children's questions as truthfully as we are able, while saying frankly that we do not know when we don't. It means keeping the areas of fantasy and reality distinct. It means avoiding suggesting that anything is known for certain when it is in fact *not* known for certain. And it means letting children realise that, when we cannot be certain, people will hold different points of view.

Even a very young child can accept that opinions vary. He is well aware of the variety of opinions members of his family express in their everyday life. Mother might recite the merits of Uncle Jim whilst Father calls him by unflattering names; brothers will argue about the respective merits of their football heroes. Children accept that there are no definitive statements that settle such debates—it is all a matter of opinion. By making children aware that people have very different ideas on vital issues, adults prepare these children to play their part in thinking about the many problems and uncertainties that face mankind.

A former Fleet Street editor used to recount this anecdote. "When I was a cub-reporter, I used to think that once I was a sub-editor I would really know what was going on in the world. When I became a sub-editor and I still did not know, I thought 'When I'm in charge of the Foreign Desk I must surely know what is *really* going on.' In due course, I became Foreign Editor, but I still did not know. After that, I thought that I might be an editor one day and then I would undoubtedly know. 'And now', he concluded, 'I am an editor, and I still don't know.'"

He would then add: "If I had known from the start that nobody knew, I might have done a good deal more thinking on my own behalf instead of expecting to find all the answers in somebody else's head."

This just about makes the point. What children need from us is not a facade of certainty but honest communication between the generations, and plenty of encouragement to join in the thinking for themselves. The goal of education—at home as at school—is not a yes-man but a thinking person. We live in an open-ended situation. The world is everywhere in movement. Change is the climate of our lives. The supreme task of adults is to help children to think straight—about themselves, about others, about the world and their responsibilities in it.

3. The Adult's Contribution

The child depends very much upon adults to interpret reality for him. His exploration of the world around him leads him to want to know more than is immediately obvious. In this we see the beginning of his intellectual and critical powers.

From a very early age, the child asks How? and Why? about all kinds of things. He trusts the adults around him to tell him the truth, and draws on their answers to build his understanding. A lively mind continues to ask How? and Why? all through life. Unfortunately, many children lose confidence in their ability to reach the truth *and give up the search*. The result is that the lively curiosity of the young child may turn into listless apathy by the time the child is twelve or thirteen.

Two influences that can easily deaden a young mind are confusion and domination. If the information we feed to a young mind does not add up to a coherent pattern, the child concerned may feel that understanding is beyond him. When confusion follows confusion, the child gives up the struggle to think.

Experiments have been made on animals to see what happens when information is given in a confused way. For example, a rat may be trained to associate a reward with a black circle and some slight punishment with a white circle. The form the experiment takes is that once the rat has got this situation "clear", it is altered so that the black circle and white circle represent reward or punishment in a random way. Whereupon the rat curls itself into a ball and refuses to make any response whatsoever. It becomes completely apathetic. If things add up to a nonsense, what is the point of trying to deal with life?

Of course absolute certainty is not possible for anyone. We constantly find ourselves in confusing situations all through life. We have the courage to struggle with them only if, in the past, we have struggled successfully with similar situations. The confidence to do this depends on our having built up a "map of reality" that is reliable. Lacking this, all confusion leaves us helpless and hopeless.

As we adults assist children to build their maps of reality, we have to be careful to see that the information we give children squares with the child's objective experience of the world. It is easy to fail in this.

To take an extreme example, nurses, we are told, used sometimes to inform their charges that the moon was made of cheese. The children, at this time, were also told that there was a man in the moon. A child's own experience of cheese going bad if left in the open, and of men *not* living in cheeses, had somehow to be squared with what he had been told about the moon. His only conclusion could be that things do not add up. This is the first step towards intellectual apathy.

Domination is another undesirable influence. It inhibits the child's intellectual development by denying it any space in which to operate. The parent or teacher who constantly *tells* and never *listens* rejects the child's own mind as of no account, at the same time as denying it exercise. This cripples all but the strongest young minds—these respond to domination with an aggressive comeback, and so preserve themselves.

Every adult has a great opportunity to promote the growth of the minds of children by encouraging the child's own thinking. We have to listen to children with real attention. This gives children confidence in the use of their own powers at the same time as giving us insight about what they are thinking and feeling. We cannot give all our attention all the time to what a talkative child

wants to say. But we can give him, or her, our *whole* attention some of the time. By this means we pay proper respect to that extraordinary event in nature—the emergence of a new mind. Our respect is the encouragement a child needs in order that he may respect his own powers and personality.

We can stimulate his powers of mind, also, by helping him make decisions, and bringing him into family, or classroom, discussions. Quite a young child can have something to say about the choice of a new car or the venue for a holiday. His contribution may not be very realistic. A ten-year-old boy may favour a red sports car when common sense indicates a sober family saloon. A compromise, *towards which the child has contributed*, could be a maroon fast-back four-seater. The important thing is that the child has the experience of *his* thinking being called upon and taken seriously.

To dominate can be a great temptation. Kind uncle came into the room to find his small nephew laboriously trying to make a high tower by piling the parts of a construction set on top of one another. The uncle at once noticed that a rickety base threatened the structure with imminent collapse. He remedied the fault and successfully piled the remaining pieces on top of the tower. The child looked on with morose indifference until his uncle had finished and then, with one sweep of his arm, sent the whole lot flying. The tower may have been well made, but it was in no way *his*.

Children love sharing with adults; they hate adult domination in any form. It is the same with thinking as with other things. They are eager for answers to their questions; they do not like being told what to think. Their instinct to resent interference is a good one, though at times inconvenient and, sometimes, intolerable. *They are fighting for recognition of their own identity.*

Indoctrination—the attempt to impose adult ideas upon the child, regardless of their basis in fact—is a particularly damaging sort of adult domination.

This for two reasons: (1) indoctrination presents a false certainty to children and (2) indoctrination blocks the children's path of enquiry. It precludes a healthy critical attitude. Indoctrination both feeds in false information and, at the same time, denies the validity of thought about the false information. It is anti-intellectual, and can only confuse minds subjected to it.

Unfortunately, whereas it is easy to recognise and condemn the indoctrination of children in other countries, it is not so easy to spot the indoctrination going on in our own. We deplore the way children in the Soviet Union are hoaxed into believing nonsense about life in the West. We are unhappy about the rabid anti-communism rampant in the United States. But we may be slow to see what *we* are selling to *our* children in the way of unsupported prejudices and dubitable certainties.

4. Thought versus Indoctrination

We have seen that our responsibility as parents and educators is to foster in the child an open, alert, confident capacity to think. He can then, at every stage, make sense of the world around him at his own level of understanding. As his powers increase with age, so will his range of comprehension. But this advance in understanding should grow out of what he has learnt before. The whole should make an integrated pattern of awareness.

Thus, to such early questions as "What is the moon made of?" and "Why is the sun bright?" we should give sufficiently accurate answers for the information we impart to be consistent with anything the child may learn later about the universe. *All* that we teach the child should follow this principle. It is vitally important to avoid confusing him. *Valid* information at the *child's* level of understanding should be our constant aim at every stage of growth.

The imposition of ideas is the antithesis of this developmental purpose. Such impositions inhibit thought, replace reason by authority, repress critical interest, and lead to confusion because, in the nature of things, indoctrination of ideas and beliefs refuses to admit the existence of alternative explanations, which are deliberately pushed aside. But these will intrude sooner or later to blur understanding and shake confidence. To give a *lead* to children's thinking is a part of the adult role, but we *invite* children to consider what we have to say; we do not *demand* belief.

Unfortunately, there is a strong temptation for those in authority to encourage the indoctrination of children at school in three areas: (1) to sustain the national image; (2) to support a political ideology; and (3) to assure the perpetuation of religious beliefs. In a country like Spain we can observe all three types of indoctrination in action; in the Soviet Union, the first two are blatantly obvious; the first is sometimes particularly marked in a new, emerging country.

In Britain we are, mercifully, exceptionally free from indoctrination within education. Jingoism is frowned upon, and politics are supposed to be dealt with in an unbiased manner. We are not, perhaps, quite as good as we think we are. Other nations charge us with giving British history a pro-British slant, while some political scientists point out that politics, if taught at all, while usually free from party bias, treats "the system" as something sacrosanct. Nevertheless, we can feel happy that, in general, indoctrination is eschewed in British education.

But there is one important exception to this which warrants our close attention since it runs counter to the general purpose of educating for clear thinking. The 1944 Education Act required that the school day should begin with an act of worship, and that all children should receive regular religious

instruction. In both instances, the indoctrination of children at school with traditional Christian beliefs was undoubtedly intended. *This is still the legal position today* although many teachers of religious education refuse to conform to the requirements of the Act.

Some people adopt the attitude that religious worship and instruction can do the children no harm and may do them good. But this is misguided. To suggest to children that something is certain when it, in fact, is not, is dishonest in itself. It also serves to distort the cognitive development of the child, because it leaves the child torn by conflicting views about the explanation of things.

What, for example, is a child to think if the TV offers him objective explanations of why the weather is as it is, while at school he is told: "We thank God for this beautiful day"? And what about when it is pouring with rain or foggy? Christian worship and RE teach the child that God is an almighty and loving creator, who watches over all things to make all things good. The child then has presented to him by the mass media frequent accounts of appalling natural disasters. Again, what, in the space age, is a child to make of "Our Father which art in heaven", now that heaven can no longer be regarded as "up there"?

At some stage, most children will sense that the religious picture of the nature of things clashes with the scientific picture at many points. They may then *doubt their own reasoning powers* because their developing outlook is in conflict with the ideas presented to them by authority. If, on the other hand, they accept their own conclusions, what will happen to their trust in their teachers, who they now see misled them? It may not be going too far to suppose that the distrust of those in authority by many young people today is, in part, the result of what some students refer to as "the religious confidence trick".

The situation is further complicated by the existence of many religious minorities in the community. If Protestant Christianity is presented as if it were the only certain, publicly-accepted, religious belief, then how is the child supposed to regard all the other religions or non-religious world-outlooks with which he is surrounded? As frauds? As something inferior? As alternatives worthy of respect? If alternatives, then what becomes of the special claims of orthodox Christianity?

Many churchmen and teachers of religious education have, over the past twenty years, come round to the point of view that indoctrination is wrong. For example, the Bishop of Chichester in the House of Lords defined indoctrination as "a process of invading by unfair pressures the private choice of individuals, using our resources for their acceptance of a specific view-point of life which at that stage they are not mature enough to resist or to make up their own minds upon". (*Hansard* 809; 15.11.67.)

But there is still a hankering, in certain quarters, to retain an element of indoctrination. A strong lobby exists for the retention of religious worship in schools. But worship is impossible without the steady emphasis on certain ideas and beliefs. Hence compulsory worship *is* indoctrination, or an attempt at it. Its very existence implies that the ideas propounded are accepted as certainties by those in authority, and that the children are expected to accept them too. This misrepresents the actual state of affairs, and many children realise this and resent it.

The educational error is to attempt to preserve intact a whole range of beliefs that are now being subject to fundamental re-evaluation.

To exclude indoctrination from nationalism, politics and religion is not to seek to banish history, politics and religion from the awareness of the child. Quite the contrary. Once the false goal of indoctrination has been completely

dropped, real education, which respects and encourages the child's own thinking, can begin. To indoctrinate is not to inform the mind but to malform it. It also sows distrust between the generations. It clearly has no place in an education whose aim is to teach children to think honestly and confidently in carrying forward their personal lives, and in preparation for responsible participation in the affairs of a democracy.

5. Understanding in Adolescence

During adolescence, the understanding of the newly-emerging young adult comes under a host of new challenges. At this stage, the boy, or girl, is moving out into the world, away from the sheltering environment of the home. Each has to forge his, or her, personal identity and independence. New social skills have to be learnt to deal with a widening encounter with society. Personal sexuality has to be successfully faced and expressed. The big test of making a mark in the adult world is now imminent. Principles to guide personal life have to be searched for and tested.

If what has preceded adolescence has provided the individual with a reliable "map of reality", a sturdy confidence in his own powers of thought, and a trust in the adults close to him, then the tasks of adolescence serve to extend and strengthen outlook and understanding. If, on the other hand, the individual enters adolescence with a confused understanding, little, or no, confidence in his own powers, and distrust of the adults close to him, then the pressures and uncertainties of adolescence are likely to lead to deepening confusion and, sometimes, profound apathy.

An adolescent cannot feel at one with a world he does not understand. Such an adolescent is driven into isolation. He may become a solitary ; or he may team up with a gang of alienated, anti-social young people. His personal

and social development leave him inadequate in the face of life.

Characteristic of inadequate adolescents are confused ideas, low attainment, broken self-confidence, and lack of trust in others. Young people so impaired in their relationships with society are forced into one or other of two false styles of life. One is retreat into isolation and fantasy. The other is some over-ostentatious attempt to compensate for their sense of personal inadequacy—hooligan violence is one such manifestation.

The parents and teachers of adolescents have, therefore, a vital part to play in helping young people attain mature adulthood. They should encourage young people to question and challenge, because it is only by so doing that young people can clarify their ideas and arrive at valid principles by which to conduct their lives.

As at earlier ages, the young people should be brought into decision-making, but now over a wider area, which should include the decisions governing the conduct of their own lives. No adolescent of any spirit will tolerate being dominated, but most adolescents, unless their attitudes have already been distorted, will readily discuss what are the appropriate limits on their own behaviour.

For example, in family one, father has told his sixteen-year-old daughter that she is to be in by half past ten *every* night. Result : constant revolt, constant rows, and deepening distrust. In family two, coming-in times have been discussed by daughter and parents with all points of view taken into account. The outcome of the discussion could be : some early nights, some later ones, and a ration of really late nights (up to around midnight) on a so-many-a-month basis. Result : equanimity and sustained trust.

Conflict and distrust are inevitable whenever the adults seem to the adolescent to be making demands that obstruct the adolescent's drive to

attain self-dependence. Trust and cooperation are the outcome of the adolescent's conviction that the adults are on his side in his striving to grow up.

This marks the difference between families where there is a yawning "generation gap" and those where there is a cheerful reciprocity between parents and children. Parents who lay down the law, and take no account of the changes that have occurred since they were young, drive their children into cold withdrawal. Communication breaks down. "You can't talk to my father. He just knows," said one young man in a discussion group. A girl's equivalent remark was: "My mother is always telling me to listen to her, but she never listens to me". The generation gap is made up of such attitudes. In fact, we are today living in an age of questioning and uncertainty when nobody *knows*, and when any claim to know exposes the individual to the charge of narrowness and rigidity. At best, we can say that, on the evidence, such-and-such seems to be the case, or "personally I believe that . . ." Such openness brings the adolescents in on every issue. Claims to know reject them.

In this era, we are all learning together. New knowledge is constantly pouring in. It is said that half the knowledge an engineer acquires at university is out of date within five years of the end of his course. That is a case of particularly rapid change, but there is change in all areas, including in those areas where certainty used to be taken for granted such as in moral ideas, sexual behaviour and religion.

We now live in an open, changing society where everyone has to be prepared to think, and where all generations have their own contribution to make towards clarifying ideas and values, and solving the range of problems with which we are faced.

To deadlock with the ideas of the young at such a time is to impoverish the thinking of both young and old.

But do the adolescents want to participate with the older generation in working on the problems of personal and social life? Research has shown that 90 per cent of young people welcome such cooperation. They want to draw on the knowledge and experience of adults. But there is one condition. The young will not tolerate domination or condemnation. The road to understanding, for both generations, is mutual respect.

6. Moral Understanding

As the child grows, and gains an increasing grasp on the world around him, there should be a deepening understanding of his relationships with other people. Much of what has been said above about the responsibility of parents is obviously relevant to this. But it is not, for the child, just a matter of learning, of knowing; unless sympathies develop which meet the child's emotional needs he is unlikely to think or behave morally. We know how important for the emotional development of the child is a stable relationship with at least one parent, and for at least the first few years of the child's life. Perhaps we do not always appreciate the need he has to discover others of his own age. It is moving towards others and becoming aware of them and their needs that lays the foundation for the child's moral growth.

For the very young child it is individual people that count; his parents are unique as people, and he treats them in a special way. If he grows up with brothers or sisters, he will soon learn to relate to them in a way that does not constantly involve appeals to mother or father. This is a big and significant step towards independence, and paves the way for a recognition that others

are as important as himself. Play groups can fill this need for the only child, as well as providing a wider range of experience for other children.

In the early stages, the child learns much more by example than by being told what to do. The way the parents treat one another, and their other children, is the important thing. The young child, no longer utterly dependent, needs to know where he is. He will feel secure only if his parents give a consistent response to his needs and demands. It is this consistency, rather than strictness or laxity in themselves, which is vital. The parents obviously have authority—the authority of being older, stronger, more knowledgeable—but their use of this authority must not be capricious, but sympathetic and understanding, if the child is to begin to make sense of his world morally. It goes without saying that a child who has been encouraged to find out for himself, to ask questions, will find it easy and natural to ask questions also about the rights and wrongs of dealing with people. The feelings and needs of others can be cited as reasons for respecting their claims on us.

Possibly the most difficult thing for parents to accept is that their child will grow up different from themselves. But attempting to make our children carbon copies of ourselves is inviting certain failure, and cheats the children of the chance of becoming people in their own right. The aim should be always one of fostering the child's ability to become a separate individual. This aim is not inconsistent with parental responsibility or with the exercise of justified authority.

When the child starts his school career, at around five years of age, he enters upon a much broader and more demanding social experience than he has encountered before. At this stage he may for the first time find moral rules being linked to a religious belief. Parents—even those who are not practising believers—may imagine that this is no bad thing, that “one needs some rules

to live by". One danger is that the new ideas will conflict with previous understanding. Another is that the child may be set an impossibly high aim in its moral conduct. To "love thy neighbour as thyself" all the time (for example) can *only* be an ideal. Most of us are realistic enough to know that we cannot constantly live up to it, but a child is more literally minded, and its "failure" to attain the ideal may lead to needless guilt and anxiety, as well as to disillusion, when it is seen that the world does not practise what is preached. It is good social education at school that can best carry forward the moral education begun at home.

Unfortunately the law which compels the schools to start the day with worship, and to teach an officially agreed syllabus on religion, is responsible for a good deal of moral confusion, because it suggests certainty where certainty is not possible. If the school does adopt a narrow, sectarian approach to religion, parents can help their children by pointing out that the ethical core of all the great religions is a common, human one; it is the outcome of mankind's experience of how we ought to live. Not one voice, but many voices, have spoken the perennial truths. For example:

"The treatment which you would not have for yourself do not mete out to other people." (Confucius: 551-479 BC)

"Hurt not others with that which pains yourself." (Buddha: 5th century BC)

"The essence of right conduct is not to injure anyone." (Jain Scriptures, India)

"What is harmful to yourself do not to your fellow men. That is the whole of the law and the remainder is but commentary." (Jewish Talmud)

"Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you,

do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.” (Bible: Matthew, 7, v.12)

At school, the young child's sense of wonder—which is wide open to any influence—can easily, but dishonestly, be channelled into worship. Dishonestly, because the parent or teacher can see the assumptions that are being made, but the child cannot. Encouraging children to worship is no more justifiable than making them salute the flag or automatically venerate Chairman Mao; it contributes nothing towards moral education, as it is an attempt to prejudice the child's own judgment. Similarly, bad religious teaching can turn idealism into priggishness, creating sexual guilt and other personality problems.

The chief root of the religious impulse is the attempt of the individual to relate himself to the world. Enough has been said earlier about the possibility of a conflict between religious and scientific pictures of the world. What must be emphasised here is the need of the child and adolescent to acquire a valid knowledge of society, and of his responsibilities within the social context. In this respect, schools may fail their children. For example, to avoid offence to parents they tend to play safe in teaching about politics as well as in tackling religion. They may also fail to give any scope for the discussion of sexual morals in terms that make sense of their pupils' experience. In addition, selection, streaming, segregation by sex, and the other inequalities in our schools, cut across natural sympathies, and effectively train children to view other people as "different". That is as objects—to be "won" sexually, to be manipulated in the process of "getting on" or for the "good of the State". An essential part of moral education consists in encouraging young people to think about and criticise society; to feel strongly about inequality and injustice; to be aware of themselves and others; to feel compassion and concern.

The young adult should be encouraged to see how his own ideas of what is right and wrong spring from, and are conditioned by, the sort of society he lives in. Only then will he see that to change his mind in the light of new evidence is not to sacrifice his integrity—that we have to move forward morally as well as in other ways.

Moral understanding today derives from valid information, experience in relating to others, a sense of personal identity and integrity, and acceptance of responsibility for one's own actions, and for contributing to the well-being of others. It is neither a list of rules nor a condition of complacent conformity. It is the means to a concerned, creative participation in affairs.

7. Objective Perspective

A child's outlook on things comes into focus as a picture of the world that he has acquired during the years of growth. We adults help the children to form that picture. What is *our* picture? Can we share it with our children? In this anti-authoritarian age, any attempt to *impose* a set of ideas must fail. Nor indeed, as we have already noted, can it be a good thing for children to take on the ideas of others uncritically. We want them to think, to question, to evaluate principles for themselves in terms of their own experience. Only so can their minds develop and mature.

Does this mean that parents and their children must for ever be poles apart, the parents stuck with their established habits of thought and their children moving further and further away from them? Quite the contrary. This is the age when humanity can no longer avoid searching for a consensus of ideas. We cannot run an increasingly interdependent world on the basis of universal conflict. The common ground has to be discovered.

The common ground is the objective perspective on things *as they are*. We are all—children and adults alike—seeking personal fulfilment. We cannot attain this by indifference to others, still less at the expense of others, but only in cooperation with others, in concern for others, in positive interaction between ourselves and others. By living in terms of such ideas, children grow into mature adults, and adults grow into their most fulfilled selves. This is inescapably true, for we are inescapably social beings—"members one of another".

But personal fulfilment is not enough in itself because it cannot exist without a society in which fulfilment is possible. People cannot attain wholeness and richness of personality in a society that thwarts and limits their potentialities. So a part of our responsibility and purpose must be to strive to improve the quality of the society in which we live. We need, and should *want*, our society to be a good society—not at the expense of other societies but rather *with* other societies, in mutual concern and mutual help, trying not to score selfish advantages for ourselves but to raise the quality of the whole.

Beyond the social perspective lies the world perspective—our responsibility for our environment, for the world, for the future. It is our task to leave the world better than we found it, to carry humanity forward, to secure the resources and beauty of the planet for those who come after us.

Such are the elements of a modern perspective. Children and adolescents can understand the values involved. These values are *not* under challenge. They do not depend upon questionable beliefs but upon life itself. They can close the generation gap and transcend the differences between nations and ideologies. Such values form a framework for the future. Because the young are of the future they are already thinking in these terms. To be with them

we have only to join in the task of rethinking the preconceptions of the past. The help of everyone is needed in shaping the new perspectives that are breaking through all over the world. Parents and children can find a common purpose in the struggle and the search.

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